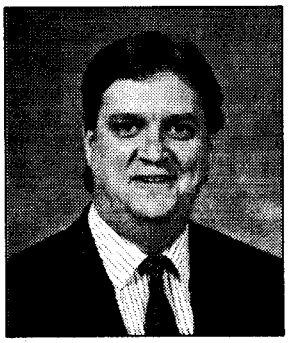
Internet friendships can add richness to life

By Jim Carroll



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With all the hype and excitement about the technology that surrounds the Internet, I think we often lose site of what is perhaps one of its most profound aspects—the fact that it is presenting people with wonderful new ways of meeting other people, and staying in contact with old friends.

Let me put into perspective the frame of mind in which I write this article. Right now, I am 14 hours away from hopping on a plane to head to Prince Edward Island for two weeks of vacation, followed by a week in Halifax. The last three weeks have seen some non-stop writing as my co-author, Rick Broadhead, and I worked to pull together the four Internet books we will release this October. The two months prior to that were spent working on the books, and travelling the country giving various speeches.

As you might expect, I am in a bit of a need of a break—both from a frantic work pace and from the Internet.

But even as I vacation, I will see the impact that the Internet has on what I do. For example, I have used the Internet through the last few weeks to arrange to rent some bikes while on the Island. Many of the arrangements have been done by electronic mail, and the owner of the bike shop has gone out of her way to provide all kinds of tips and advice on what to do while there. She has even invited my family and I to dinner. When I go into the shop, it will almost seem like I am visiting an old friend—and I expect that we will have a friendly, lengthy chat. The Internet has turned a simple rental transaction into something that will be a lot more fun.

And I had something fascinating happen today. I took a break from my writing for a moment and read my e-mail. I just received a message from a fellow who bought one of my recent books, Surviving the Information Age. He is a law professor in the United States—but while reading the book, he realized that we grew up in the same city, graduated from high school the same year—and attended Dalhousie University together. In the last few hours, we've had some e-mail going back and forth, as we discover common friends, events and activities. I'm just about to check his World Wide Web site for a photo to see if I remember him. I am sure we will keep in contact.

And I've just had a series of communications with a friend of my sisters—with the result that his family and my own will get together on the Island.

In all of these interactions, the Internet is paving the way for a new way to meet and greet people. And I think that all too often, we forget about the magical and unique forms of personal contact that the Internet can bring about—and the fact that aside from all the technical glitz and sizzle that it offers, it is a wonderful tool that can bring about friendships, or which can help old friends discover one another again.

This is not something new to me—I have been on line in one way or another since 1982. In those years, I have established friends in such far-flung places as the U.K., Australia, Belgium and the United Arab Emirates. I have met many of those people, either when they have been in Canada, or when I have been lucky enough to go overseas. For 10 years, I have kept electronic contact with a buddy in Sweden. He now is moving with his family to Manhattan, and we will, hopefully, go to see them in the fall. That type of sustained friendship is typical of many in the online world.

The Internet is truly amazing; from my perspective, it is providing a lot of people on line with some new, unique, rich and truly everlasting friendships. As I head off to another part of the country, I realize that, while there, I will probably meet some people whom I will keep contact with through the years.

And from that sense, it brings a little more richness to my own life. We are all so fortunate to live in such wonderful times.

I gotta go—I have a plane to catch!